

## Giving the Experience of Planting and Harvesting Produce

### Overview

The combined energies of Yad Ezra, an innovative non-profit organization on the cusp of expanding its mission, and **DesignTeam Plus**, a forward-thinking architectural and interior design firm with a passion for community, brought about a state-of-the-art greenhouse and master gardening program that today addresses food insecurity in the metropolitan Detroit area, giving participants the experience of planting and harvesting their own produce.

### Background

Founded in 1990 as Michigan's only kosher food pantry, Yad Ezra (helping hand) serves almost 2,500 individuals in the metropolitan Detroit Jewish community each month through the distribution of groceries to families in need. This amounts to more than one million pounds of food annually. Yad Ezra also assists with school lunch programs, holiday ritual food items, lifecycle events, and household items. It relies on a cadre of dedicated staff and volunteers to carry out its mission. It is consistently rated a top non-profit organization.

**DesignTeam Plus**, based in Birmingham, Michigan, has a longstanding reputation for contributing expertise and volunteer hours to area non-profits to make a positive impact in the community. Led by professionals, former educators at Lawrence Technology University, the company brought students to Yad Ezra in 2011 to design a mural for the side of the building, located on Eleven Mile Road, in Berkley, Michigan.

"We surveyed the campus and saw the potential for Yad Ezra to add a greenhouse to grow fresh produce," said DTP principal Shari Stein. "We

envisioned it as a two-fold opportunity: for greater community engagement and a way for clients receiving groceries to feel a sense of empowerment."

## Challenge

Over several conversations, the idea began to germinate in the minds of Yad Ezra executive director Lea Luger, and board president Nancy Kleinfeldt. By 2016, Luger was intent on extending the Yad Ezra brand to raise awareness of the organization in the wider community and engage the next generation of volunteers.

At the time, Detroit was emerging from its 2013 declaration of bankruptcy, and urban farming, which has a history in Detroit dating back to the 19th century, was having a renaissance. Local foundations were seeking to fund community gardening programs, and a Yad Ezra greenhouse could teach current clients and the community about food insecurity and home gardening, and also grow produce to augment its food pantry offerings.

"It was going to be a win-win," said Stein. "Adding a greenhouse would allow the organization to grow in a healthy way, and reach all ages, with a message that everyone can come together for the greater good."

DTP Principal, Harold Remlinger and team created renderings showing plans and of the proposed greenhouse, and calculated the anticipated amount of produce. could be grown and pointed out the educational benefits to moving forward. Some of these benefits included partnerships with schools and area agencies, educating donors and patrons, and boosting the City of Berkley, which approved the process in 2015.

Funding came from a transformative gift from a local Yad Ezra donor who honored his parent's love of gardening, and a large grant from the Fisher Foundation provided funds for hiring, supplies, and programming.

"The greenhouse was a way to attract people who were geeked up about us harvesting our own produce to come into Yad Ezra and learn about our mission," Luger says. "It was always intended to support our mission. And it did."

## Solution

The greenhouse was completed in 2016, and master gardeners began to grow produce, run classes, and offer volunteer opportunities. By 2017, the proof was in the pudding: educating the community about sustainability and providing resources for growing one's own fresh food had successfully merged with Yad Ezra's ongoing mission to distribute food to vulnerable individuals.



But the organization wanted to go even farther. Thus, the Giving Gardens Club was born to give participants the experience of planting and harvesting their own produce to take home. Membership is free to both current Yad Ezra clients and the larger community; all are granted access to a variety of seeds, seedlings, transplants, garden consultation and assistance, tool sharing, education, and leadership opportunities.

"Giving Gardens programs educate our community about the concept of farm-to-table food and offer resources and opportunities to encourage people to eat more fresh produce and be more self-sufficient," Luger explains.

The club has approximately 140 members to date. In addition to taking home what they grow, the members also contribute to the growth and harvesting of fresh herbs, lettuce, kale, and spinach that make their way to clients, with a goal of packaging 50 single servings of produce into each



daily delivery. "Things like that are wonderful to get to people," said Giving Gardens manager Josh Gordon. "People crave healthy food."



Several engaging partnerships have resulted from Giving Gardens with organizations throughout metropolitan Detroit, including Growing Pontiac, Community Supporting Agriculture, Hazon, JARC, and even a Ferndale coffee shop.

These partnerships not only ensure Giving Gardens' output of 75 unique varieties get to as much of the population as possible, but they have also served as interfaith and community builders and draw new and additional volunteers to the organization's activities. The most recent example is the development of a 6,000 square foot garden on the property of nearby Our Lady of La Salette Church in Berkley, Michigan, a few minutes' drive from Yad Ezra.



During the early days of the pandemic, in Spring 2020, Josh approached the church to tend their garden, which had been lying fallow. The renamed "Genesis Garden" produced more than \$12,000 worth of cabbages, radishes, beans, zucchini, cucumbers, and beets this past year, and Yad Ezra reimburses the church for the cost of water.

"We know that in receiving resources for home gardening or receiving a tomato plant, a person is not going to prevent hunger. But it is a step in the right direction," Gordon says.



Luger agrees. "The Giving Gardens Club, and the greenhouse overall, are not meant to be a Band Aid. But to learn about gardening, to know that you can grow produce, can be more than a point of pride - it's life affirming."

As for DPT, which continues to stay involved with Yad Ezra, the company's principals continue to reflect upon it as one of their most rewarding projects. "The educational model really resonates with us as instructors, it has a focus on health and wellbeing, and it benefits the greater good. This kind of project is right up our alley," Stein says.

"It proves the adage that when you believe in something, and the impact it can have, great things happen."

**Links to articles on project:**

<https://detroitcatholic.com/news/daniel-meloy/genesis-garden-raises-crops-for-the-poor-through-catholic-jewish-partnership>

<https://thejewishnews.com/2020/10/06/planting-partnerships-at-yad-ezra/>

<https://thejewishnews.com/2019/05/16/planting-seeds-of-change-at-yad-ezra-food-pantry/>